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SUBJECT: DARFUR ROUNDUP: SLA/MM CLASHES WITH TRIBESMEN IN NORTH DARFUR; JEM HOLED UP IN EAST JEBEL MARRA; UPDATE ON MUHAJARIYA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Clashes broke out between the inhabitants of Wadaa in North Darfur and the forces of Minni Minnawi who were returning to the area on February 7 and 10, according to several sources. The local tribesmen were reportedly fed up with SLA/MM and attempted to prevent them from re-occupying the town. Meanwhile, JEM troops remain holed up east of Jebel Marra, according to rebel and other sources, who anticipate they will remain there until the conclusion of the Doha talks. UNAMID sources noted that a SAF convoy of 30 vehicles and 100 soldiers was spotted heading toward Kabkabiya, possibly in attempt to intercept JEM if it flees North. In South Darfur, humanitarian officials reported that Muhamjariya town is largely intact, and that nearly all of the 6,000 to 7,000 people who were huddling at the UNAMID Team Site (TS) team site have returned home. However, over 3,000 people have arrived at Zam Zam IDP camp near El Fasher in recent days, including IDPs from the Shearia area in South Darfur that was damaged by bombing, as well as Zaghawa inhabitants of Muhamjariya town, who fled when the town ceased to be under SLM/MM (Zaghawa) military control. End Summary.

SLM/MM CLASHES WITH VILLAGERS IN NORTH DARFUR

¶2. (SBU) Adam Ahmed, Chairman of the Darfur Land Commission and an ally of Minni Minnawi, met with poloff on February 10 to voice his reservations with the movement's armed attacks in and around Wadaa, a town 100 kilometers southeast of El Fasher, North Darfur. Primarily settled by pastoralists from the Mima tribe, Wadaa and the surrounding villages comprise part of SLA/MM's "liberated area" in southeastern North Darfur, but Ahmed told poloff that the local villagers were "fed up" with SLA/MM's occupation of the villages. During fighting in Muhamjariya in January, SLA/MM troops departed the area, presumably to fight against JEM further south, and upon returning to Wadaa on February 7 they attempted to retake the town. According to Ahmed, groups of villagers from different tribes, including Arabs, combined forces to fight off the advance of Minnawi's forces, allegedly killing seven SLA/MM fighters. On February 10, Ahmed said SLA/MM attempted another advance, this time with up to 17 vehicles, resulting in numerous civilian casualties but no tangible gain for the movement. Ahmed told poloff that GOS forces were not involved in the clashes, though on February 10 Al-Ahdath newspaper reported that government forces took control of the area after Minnawi's forces withdrew, citing official sources. (Note: On February 11, Minni Minnawi told CDA that his forces in Wadaa had been attacked by SAF and janjaweed troops, resulting in the death of seven SLM/MM fighters. He claimed that SLM/MM had retaken the area. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Ahmed, who described himself as a vocal critic inside Minnawi's Khartoum-based circle, views the movement's armed actions in Darfur as part of a larger trend of Zaghawa rebel groups (including SLA/Unity, JEM and SLA/MM) sowing insecurity in Darfur through their overzealous territorial ambitions. Ironically, he

believes that the events in Wadaa, in addition to JEM's recent armed escalation in Darfur, could strengthen the hand of the GOS in the long run, as Darfuris see the Zaghawa rebel groups as the greatest threat to peace and stability. He cautioned that the USG and the international community risk their credibility in Darfur by being seen as sympathetic to groups like SLA/MM and JEM. "If the international community thinks that the Zaghawa movements can create peace, they are setting the stage for the next war," he forecasted. "The U.S. must understand - no one will accept Zaghawa leadership."

JEM HOLED UP IN EAST JEBEL MARRA

¶4. (SBU) While Minnawi's forces are still reeling from a series of military setbacks over the past month, JEM is apparently now holed up in East Jebel Marra. On February 10, SLA/Abdul Wahid Commander Mohamed Abdel-Salam (known as 'Terada') told emboff that JEM forces are still camped out in East Jebel Marra, east of the village of Marra, but that they are neither on the run nor under siege by the SAF. Another SLA/Abdul Wahid commander, Abdulgadir Abdurrahman Ibrahim (known as 'Gadura') affirmed that JEM remains in East Jebel Marra and that they continue to move freely in the area. On February 9, Suleiman Marjan, a Meidob commander aligned with Abdul Wahid, also affirmed JEM's presence in East Jebel Marra but stated that SLA/Abdul Wahid has blocked off JEM access to the mountain. "If Khalil's forces are planning to enter the Jebel, we will not allow it to happen," he said. (Note: Marjan himself is not thought to be in Jebel Marra, and most likely remains north of El Fasher in the area around Helif, where he faced off with SAF forces in late 2008. End Note.) A UNAMID source told poloff he believed JEM might be seeking to treat its wounded at one of the ICRC clinics in Jebel Marra.

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¶5. (SBU) On February 11, poloff spoke to a UNAMID source who revealed that on February 6 approximately a hundred SAF soldiers in thirty military vehicles mounted with 12.7mm anti-aircraft and heavy anti-vehicular recoilless guns were observed moving from the Tawila UNAMID TS location, presumably coming from El Fasher. The vehicles were initially parked at the GOS paramilitary camp in Tawila and later departed Tawila through the Tawila-Kabkabiya road. The UNAMID source speculated that the GOS force was heading towards Kabkabiya to attempt to intercept JEM if it flees North, though he expected JEM to remain in its current location until the conclusion of the Doha talks.

UPDATE ON MUHAJARIYA

¶6. (SBU) In South Darfur, Muhajariya is beginning to return to normalcy after the conflicts there between JEM and SLM/MM forces (and then between JEM and SAF) last month. On February 9 UN DSRSG Ameerah Haq told CDA Fernandez that nearly all of Muhajariya town is intact, and that more damage from GOS bombing actually occurred in the Labado/Shearia area. She stated that the 6,000 to 7,000 people who were huddling at the UNAMID team site (TS) have returned home, though approximately 500 remain at the site. (Note: the improvised settlement of 500 had existed outside UNAMID's camp long before the recent fighting. End Note.) Haq reported that food distribution has resumed, but that the GOS had not allowed INGOs MSF and Solidarit to resume their normal work.

¶7. (SBU) Haq also told CDA that since Muhajariya is no longer under Zaghawa military control (neither SLA/MM nor JEM), a number of Zaghawa have left the town and headed North from where they originally came from. She reported that 5 trucks with Zaghawa IDPs, mostly women and children, arrived in Zam Zam IDP camp outside El Fasher from South Darfur. (Note: On February 9, UNAMID reported that the total number of new individuals who have arrived at Zam Zam Camp--either by truck or by donkey--stands at 3,054 from 878 households, with a particularly large influx on 8 and 9 February. The people arriving by donkey hail mostly from Abu Dangal, 30 km west of Shearia in South Darfur and other small villages, while people arriving on trucks are coming from Muhajariya town, according to the leaders of the new arrivals. End Note.)

¶8. (SBU) Haq reported that the GOS sent a team of doctors into Muhajariya town to provide medical assistance, and has also sent the Fur Shartai, Ibrahim Abdullah, to mediate between the Zagawa who remain and the Birgid tribe. (Note: The Birgid are the original inhabitants of Muhajeriya who have seen their land and power usurped over the past few years by the influx of Zagawa. End Note). The Birgid lived in fear of the Zagawa, she said, and they now feel they have the upper hand with the GOS back in charge.

¶9. (SBU) Just one day prior on February 8, OCHA sources returning from a site visit told aidoffs that Muhajariya had remained largely empty but intact, and said they saw no evidence of looting. The marketplace was completely devoid of people, though several shops appeared to be open. The only signs of destruction witnessed were at the former residential compound of MSF H, which had burned to the ground when the fighting erupted. Some shrapnel damage had also been sustained at the office of Solidarit, according to local staff there. OCHA sources stated that there is hardly any presence of SAF in town, as most troops have moved to the outskirts of town. The SAF command had established its headquarters at the MSF clinic, but subsequently vacated it in order to hand it back to MSF (when MSF returns). The UNAMID Team Cite Commander and MILOBS stated that there is not yet a civilian administration in place, and the town remains under military control.

UNAMID HELICOPTER FIRED UPON

¶10. (SBU) UNAMID sources reported that on February 9 at 10:32 hours a UNAMID Mi-8 helicopter was fired upon while in flight by unknown assailants approximately 70 km southwest of El Fasher, while on a food supply mission. No casualties were recorded and the aircraft returned to El Fasher safely. The helicopter was flying at a height of 8500 feet when it was hit, which along with the scope of the damage, indicates that it may have been struck by rounds from an anti-aircraft gun, according to UNAMID sources. UNAMID suspects that it must have been JEM, but other groups in Darfur also have heavy artillery. UNAMID's investigation is ongoing.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: SLM/Minnawi's clash with villagers in Wadaa reveals the movement's desperation to cling to what little territory

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it now controls, having lost the strongholds of Muhajariya and Gereida to the GOS and the confused nature of much of the fighting in Darfur. Furthermore, the villagers' resistance is further indicative of the lack of popular support and legitimacy of SLM/MM and the other Zagawa-based armed rebel movements in general (perhaps with the notable exception of SLA/AW, which is a largely defensive rather than offensive force). It also reveals the complex nature of violence in Darfur and highlights the role of Zagawa rebel movements in perpetuating this violence, underscoring the need for a broad-based ceasefire; in this particular incident, it seems that neither the GOS nor Arab paramilitary groups - nor even other rebel groups - were involved.

FERNANDEZ